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Ignore extremism at our peril

Abdullah Ahmad

IT HAS been more than six years since I last observed an election. I spent two days in Indera Kayangan only to discover that nothing has changed.

We still live in a polluted moral and political environment. At the various ceramahs, they were saying something different from what they thought. The Opposition did not believe anything the Government said, ignoring facts because they cared only for themselves.

Any political party which disregards realpolitik will and should fail nationally.

Dirty politics, mudslinging, character assassination and other chicanery - trademarks of the Opposition - are good entertainment but they cannot even, at the best of times, unseat a long-standing and focused Government.

It is a ridiculous, even pathetic, case at this point in time. I would have thought they would at least come to grips with the political reality that things have changed and are changing since September 11.

I know each of us has pride, prejudice, strength and foible. Some are eccentric and many vulnerable. A few are plain stupid, politically speaking.

When political leaders ignore facts, they ignore truth and their candidates and parties suffer. Pas and Keadilan might have persuaded their listeners and earned sustained applause (mostly from outsiders out to have fun) but they were, as they have found out in Indera Kayangan, a poor compensation.

That while they had the good feelings, Barisan Nasional (BN) retained the seat easily with a bigger-than-expected majority. I must admit that the larger than two-to-one margin surprised me. I had said in this column even before nomination that the BN victory was a foregone conclusion, the question was the size of the majority.

The big majority (in the local context) was caused by a clear and definitive change in the political perception of the Malay voters. The Government and Umno have become more credible and they must now capitalise on this shift cleverly and move on from Indera Kayangan.

Indera Kayangan is a model constituency in the sense that it is racially delicately-balanced. No one race is dominant. The non-Malay voters outnumber the Malays by just 4 per cent. It has always been held by the BN via MCA.

The pleasant surprise, since the 1999 general election, is that the Malay voters have since become more practical and less obsessed with emotions and sideshows. They seem to have realised that the Prime Minister's job is to rule, not to wrangle nor gratify a man. He is charged with making all Malaysians happy.

He appears to be doing a good job, but more importantly, he enjoys doing it. To continue performing this, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad must necessarily keep the Treasury under his direct charge.

Idealism, even fair play, is occasionally firmly set aside in realpolitik. Palestine and Afghanistan are good examples. In politics, as in love and war, everything is fair.

Thomas Jefferson said: What is practicable must often control what is pure theory, and the habits of the governed determine in a great degree what is practicable.

He considered his own purchase of Louisiana in 1803 (and was admitted as a State in 1812) unconstitutional, but he told the Congress that the

agreement with Napoleon must be ratified!

What happened in Indera Kayangan was clear: Keadilan had neither electoral muscle nor credible machinery and local leadership. Big brother Pas provided the mass support and the organisation. This is no exaggeration, after all Pas is older (circa 1951), battle-experienced and fatigued. In any event, Pas tends to attract more Malay supporters and adventurers.

Keadilan, not unexpectedly and understandably, flogged the waning issue of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Nor the squabbles within the party helped its desperate attempt to put up a good performance in Perlis which would, had it happened, have been a political boost for Anwar who is now serving sentences in Sungai Buloh prison.

The fear of Islamic extremism as espoused by Pas is real. Pas' championing of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and implied call for the Talibanisation of Malaysia, made the frenzied converts delirious but it was a death knell for the non-Muslims and enlightened Malays.

Pas' keen embrace of Keadilan changed the political equation. The BN, which upholds a gentle form of Islam, the real religion as perceived by many, is back in vogue. I do get the impression since September 11 that the tide has turned against the Opposition, Pas in particular.

The crucial question is how long will the tide last? A week is a long time in politics, even shorter in Malaysia.

Cikgu Oui Ah Lan's big win is a demonstration that Malaysians, even the Malays, understand now how dangerous the Islamist extremists are. Their activities, holier-than-thou arrogant attitude and high profile are the reasons why, I believe, the people came out in support of BN.

In the last general election, Guar Syed Alwi and Kampung Bakau were Pas' strongholds, but last Saturday, they defected. A Pas leader told me there were several reasons but credited it mainly to the new political phenomenon in rural Malaysia: Puteri Umno. He was supported by Oui and two top leaders of MCA who volunteered their opinion to me.

Puteri Umno was virulently attacked by Opposition speakers. Would they have savaged an ineffective and incompetent group? Many people are starting to revise their opinion about Puteri Umno, as Pas leaders have, albeit grudgingly, acknowledged that their party is facing a brigade of dedicated, brave and young Umno cadres. And smart ladies to boot!

Of course, Wanita Umno also played its crucial role as always. But the media and political attention have shifted to Puteri.

There is no doubt that Umno is recapturing the hearts and minds of the Malays, surprisingly even among the first-time voters. I asked several as they came out after voting at Sekolah Derma (voting channel one). They more or less said, as if in chorus: We are fed up with these holier-than-thou Islamists. We are in the 21st century and they are trying to put the clock back!

If they represent the feeling of their generation across the nation, things look good for the future.

This feeling will endure if the Government and the ruling party can show the young voters they are not afraid of the political adventurers and religious extremists. That they will not only confront them but send them back to where they belong.

The worst thing this Government can do is to grant the Islamists' wish to Talibanise Malaysia, through default.

If the Government controls schools, universities and mosques, monitors closely those promoting hatred and politics of exclusion, continues to reject theocracy and excoriate those who have and are perverting Islam for their own political ends, I am confident, Indera Kayangan is the harbinger of better things to come.

Indera Kayangan brings out to the fore an emerging Puteri Umno which is complementing the already powerful women power of Wanita Umno.

It is too early to write the report card of Puteri Umno but if it could sustain and improve its performance in Perlis, it will be an obvious indicator of what politics must be and will be in the years to come.

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